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A CHEROKEE BALL-PLAY AND DUEL

BY W. A. THOMPSON

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"So winter passed, and when the spring
Was mild and warm in everything,
One day, at Madelina's side,
I walked the champaign still and wide,
How fresh the leaf on bush and bough!
How green the sunflowered turf below!
Afar, upon an upland lawn,
St. Mary's convent crowned the view,
Its roofs and turrets darkly drawn
Upon the light and living blue.
And she so near, so sweet, so dear!
And none to see and none to hear,
And only that enchanting sky
'Twixt us and bright infinity;
My heart leaped up, its barriers broke,
And all its blissful passion spoke.

"She heard me with a cheek so white,
And such an anguish in her eye,
I would have clasped her in my fright,
But with a shudder and a cry,
'O, touch me, woo me not!' she said,
'I am a pledged, devoted maid;
Ere I had numbered summers seven,
I promised all my life to Heaven;
My every prayer hath sealed the vow,
I must not, cannot break it now.
Mother of sorrows, pity me!
Thou dost, but O, thou canst not free!'

"Upon this cross her lips she pressed,
Then clasped the symbol to her breast;
Raised heavenward looks that mutely prayed,
Then turned, and fondly, sadly said,
'My friend, if thou hast loved me, go;
My heart hath sinned enough for thee,
And Christ and Mary only know
How deep hath been its agony.
Farewell! perchance we'll meet again
Where love will not be sin or pain!'

"As if a wanderer, long from home,
To the beloved place should come,
And meet a sentry at the door,
Who tells him it is his no more—
That hostile powers possess the land,
And force him from his native strand—
He hears, and stands in woful trance,
Heart-stricken by the fatal chance:
E'en so I heard, and so I stood
At the barred gates of promised good,
Then, wild with love and baffled hope,
I sought with her resolve to cope.
A losing strife—I could not brook
The silent pleading of her look;
Love to himself a traitor proved
In conflict with his own beloved,
And Reason faltered, fain to spare
The creed that nursed a life so fair.

"And so I yielded to her prayer,
And led her to St. Mary's shrine,
There, in a presence great, divine,
To rend her from this heart of mine.
And there I left her, kneeling low
Amid the votive flowers of May,
And with a burning sense of woe
And injury, I turned away.
But not in prayer to woo relief;
I sought another cure for grief,
And, flying from those scenes afar,
Enlisted in a foreign war.

"I felt the breath of battle blow;
I saw the dead lie cold below;
At length my bleeding heart forbore
To mourn life's losses at death's door.
And in the still and solemn night
That bordered on the fiery fight,
On the long march, or in the gloom
Of hospital or prison room,
My soul, so oft from death redeemed,
Looked up, and on its darkness streamed
The glory of the Lord, my shield,
In all his tenderness revealed.
And so I felt my sorrow yield.
And when the peace-flower bloomed anew,
All heavenly from that hellish dew,
A solemn peace my heart possessed,
And struck its music through my breast.

"Upon my native soil again,
The kindred of my blood embraced,
Once more the memory-haunted plain
All other images effaced,
And drew me, like a pleading ghost,
To seek its scenes at any cost.
O, never weary pilgrim neared
The shrine by holiest hopes endeared,
In such an ecstasy of soul—
Half fear, all joy, beyond control—
As shook my pulses while I moved
Toward those dear haunts of my beloved!

"And first I sought St. Mary's fane.
The doors stood open, it was May;
I saw the altar wreathed again
As on that mournful parting day.
But where she knelt a coffin stood,
Open and brimmed with flowers of spring,
As if it held some lovely thing
As young, as beautiful, as good.
My heart stood still. Yes, all was o'er;
I knew my love would weep no more!

"Her eyes were sealed for long repose,
Her mouth was like a fading rose,
Her fair, thin hands upon her breast
Were folded in eternal rest.
I stood and gazed, and could not weep,
I felt her mine to hold and keep;
Into my heart's barred house of gloom
I took her in her sweet death-bloom,
And felt the sorrow and the sin
Depart, and glory enter in!

"Then through the roofs a music rung,
And words, as from an angel's tongue:
'The marriage of the Lamb is come,
Rejoice! the bride is welcomed home.'
With changes sweet, it came again,
And still my heart replied, amen!

"It ceased, and at my side there stood
The gray old priest, sincere and good.
'Peace to thy soul!' he kindly said,
'I have a message from the dead.
She begged me, when her soul was freed,
And she before the altar laid,
To take the amber rosary,
O'er which she long had wept and prayed,
From off her breast and send it thee.
'"And tell him 'tis a sign," she said,
"That I am with the blessed dead."

And here her eyes grew large and bright,
As if she saw some rapturous sight:
'"And tell him we shall meet again,
Where love will not be sin or pain."
Whoe'er a dying prayer denied?
I promised, and she sweetly died.
I came the chaplet to remove,
And find thee here to claim the gift;
Take it, and may this cross uplift
Thy spirit to the realms above!'
He drew it from her icy hold,
I took it with a hand as cold.
Again the organ music rung,
And loud the hidden singers sung:
'The marriage of the Lamb is come,
Rejoice! the bride is welcomed home.'
And my soothed spirit answered then,
As now and evermore, Amen!"

A CHEROKEE BALL-PLAY AND DUEL.

BY W. A. THOMPSON.

THE Cherokees, located on the western frontier of Arkansas, can scarcely now be called Indians, much less savages. At all events, they are as much advanced in civilization as their American neighbors. They have schools, a constitution, laws, courts, and more wealth, according to numbers, than any other body politic in the world. Many of their sons and daughters are educated in the first seminaries in New England. Besides, they are at present more than half white, owing to a long course of frequent intermarriage with the white people. They have adopted the names of the whites, also copied their dress, institutions and manners, and especially the custom of duelling, so prevalent on their borders. They still retain, however, some of their ancient amusements, and among the rest, the great game of which they are so excessively fond, the Ball-Play, described in the sequel.

We give as a voucher for the truth of our narrative, the Hon. George W. Paschal, of Van Buren, Arkansas, a gentleman well known to the commercial world of New York. Mr. Paschal was several years a judge of the supreme court in his adopted State. He is thoroughly acquainted with the Cherokees, having espoused a sister of the famous chief John Ridge. He was present with the writer at the ball-play now to be noticed.

It was ten o'clock, the fourth of May, 1838. The hour, previously fixed at the last general council, had arrived for the commencement of the great national games—imperial paragon of all games the sun of heaven ever saw—the famous Cherokee ball-play.

Immediately the six marshals of the day, distinguished by long crimson scarfs swaling from their shoulders, began to move about with bustling haste, arranging preliminaries and clearing the ground. The site had been most admirably chosen, both with a view to the perilous sport of the performers and convenient for the host of spectators. "*The Looking-glass Prairie*," so called on account of its small size and exceeding beauty, is not more than half a mile in extent, and, being environed by majestic forests, resembles a mirror, having its frame wreathed with fantastic garlands. Near the centre of this smooth plain is a circular line of five considerable mounds, enclosing a depressed and perfectly level space of from forty to fifty yards in diameter. Here was the arena, altogether free from grass and somewhat dusty, having been trodden for years by the feet of strong men contending for victory in a sort of strife almost as terrible as real battle. Surrounding the arena, large ropes, attached to posts of cedar set in the earth at the base of the conical mounds, were stretched to their utmost tension, thus serving to separate the crowd of beholders from the champions in the grand game. The mounds themselves, with

sloping sides touching each other by their gentle acclivity and moderate elevation, formed a fine raised amphitheatre for the assembled multitude, who might be said, almost without hyperbole, to comprise the whole Cherokee nation; for both sexes, all ages and every condition of life, had gathered to the common point and stated period of annual reunion.

My glance was attracted from the aggregative mass of human forms by a vision of individual beauty, brighter than anything I had previously seen or ever conceived, save in the starlit drapery of dreams. Seated among several older persons in a carriage on the summit of the mound, only a few paces from where I stood, was a young girl, whose appearance realized all my imagination had ever painted as the possible perfection of female loveliness. In addition to the charms, for the most part hereditary to the quadroons of her tribe—grace of figure, harmony in every feature, and melting sweetness of smile, transparent and intellectual beauty—this bewitching creature possessed a countenance peculiar and irresistible, yet thoroughly indescribable. I essayed a thousand times to profile that face and daguerreotype the lustre of those beamy black eyes, whose rays seemed to emanate from some unknown and measureless distance in the depths of the soul, or, perchance, out of the heights of heaven, but I have always been forced to cast down my powerless pen in despair.

"That is Emma Starr," said my friend Paschal, observing the direction of my admiring gaze, "the most beautiful woman in the nation."

"In the world!" I added, mentally.

"And yet," continued he, "her six brothers are the most notorious desperadoes and duellists west of the Mississippi, although she herself is tender-hearted and innocent as a child; and, what is still stranger, no contemptible devotee to the Muses."

"What a pity," I remarked, with increasing interest, "that such an angel could not be removed from associations so uncongenial to a noble nature."

My friend replied with a piece of information that darkened, to me, forever, a whole streaming galaxy of nebulous hopes.

"She was to have been wedded some six weeks ago to the eloquent young lawyer Horace Jordan. You have heard of him. But her bold, bad brothers, for what reason I am not apprised, broke off the match, and, it is said, threatened her lover's life; but I see him yonder."

And Judge Paschal pointed out with his finger a tall, slender form, leaning against one of the posts near the arena.

Suddenly the herald's bugle pealed a clear, piercing note, and every eye was instantly on the ring, into which fifty braves might be seen leaping, by single bounds, over the ropes high as the waist. These champions were all dressed alike in leather pantaloons, fitting tightly as the skin, and reaching not more than half way down the thigh. Such was their only garment, the rest of their bodies being completely bare, and shining from a recent copious anointment of yellow colored oil. Choicer specimens of athleticism could not well be found, should you search the wide world over. Volumes of swelling muscle and sharp ridges of naked nerves, literally quivering with pure excess of strength and redundant vitality, all revealed distinctly in the vivid light of cloudless May sunbeams, gave ample assurance how desperate must be the coming conflict.

The thousands of spectators on the natural amphitheatre of old mounds could see them all, and commenced betting furiously on their various favorites. All around me I could hear wagers proffered, but mostly refused, that some one of the "Starrs," and especially "*Big Jim*," would win the *hundred scores* which were to be counted before the termination of the game.

Again the bugle sounded, and the chief marshal advanced to one side of the arena, holding in his hand a ball covered with leather and of ordinary dimensions, but loaded with several bullets to give it greater force. By means of a strong sling he hurled the little hissing globe high up in the air, as nearly as possible over the centre of the ring. The gladiators scattered at different points around the enclosed space, and each one touching the ropes, followed with his eyes the ascending missile, to watch the course it might take. It rose half a thousand feet, slower and slower, seemed to rest an instant like a small speck in the sky, and then began to fall, faster in the ratio reversed of its upward flight. Tremendous, then, was the rush of the athletæ to gain the line of its descent before it should again plumb the earth. The shock of fifty men running at full speed from opposite directions and meeting in a common focus embodied in mere idea the extreme of danger. The peril to life and limb was

rendered more fearful by the rules of the game, which permitted every one to work his way by any act of violence short of direct blows. I shuddered and caught my breath as if suddenly immersed in ice-water on beholding more than a dozen braves prostrate on the ground, many of whom had to be carried from the ring with bleeding noses and broken bones by the marshals and their assistants.

Owing to his superior swiftness of foot, Sam Runabout, a young Cherokee of the genuine stock, reached the descending ball first, and by a dexterous stroke, when it was only two yards from the earth, sent it whizzing beyond the ropes.

"Score ten for Runabout!" cried the chief marshal to the recorder, and a loud shout greeted the announcement.

Once more the herald's bugle brayed out for another round, and a hundred fresh aspirants, in whose breasts the enthusiasm caused by the scene had triumphed over prudence, sprang into the ring. And again the ball shot high in the air, and the same result of scarred faces and fractured limbs ensued, aggravated, however, by the increased numbers in the arena.

"Score down ten more for Runabout!" said the marshal.

The youth had again succeeded in his difficult feat. Wagers were now laid at ten to one in favor of Runabout, who had already won twenty "figures," and a hundred would close the game. But the wise ones, and among them Thomas Wolfe, chief of the nation, still bet on "Big Jim Starr."

"This is murderous!" I exclaimed with horror, as one of the gladiators was borne up the mound and deposited on the grass, a few steps from my side, and his wife fell down in a swoon on her husband's pale and apparently lifeless body.

"Wait a little. The murder has not yet begun," answered Judge Paschal, who had often previously witnessed such bloody spectacles.

Again the bugle yelled forth a third sound, and drew larger crowds into the arena, and again the ball soared like a bird loose from the hand. My eyes were directed to young Runabout. I saw him start with the rapidity of an arrow; but he had scarcely made two leaps when he was caught by big Jim Starr, who commenced dragging him backwards. The ensuing struggle needed only the description of a Homer to embalm it with the sublime. The antagonists, clinched in the iron, Indian hug, writhing and twisting like two angry serpents linked in the coils of mortal strife, swayed to and fro for more than a minute, then falling heavily, to the amazement of everybody, Runabout was uppermost. His success, however, proved only momentary; for quick as thought Starr turned him and grasped his throat, arose, pulled him to the circumference of the ring, and then threw him, with his blackish-purple face and strained, bloodshot eyes, like a lump of lead over the ropes.

"Score down forty for Big Jim Starr!" cried the marshal.

Such was the custom of the game. He who could force his adversary over the ropes acquired the right to his mark on the ledger.

It so happened that Runabout fell on the outside of the ring, near the cedar post against which Horace Jordan had been all the while leaning, surveying silently the progress of the game. The sight of his sister's lover, or perhaps some slight look of scorn on the young lawyer's features, aroused all the cherished hatred and venom of the victor, and he fairly shouted:

"Base pettifogger! you can gaze on the sports of brave men, but dare not, for your coward's soul, take part in the game of glory!"

"I dare!" was the ringing response of Horace Jordan, as he cleared the ropes at a leap.

The American stood in the arena of the Indian gladiators. Stripping instantly to the trowsers, and tying a red silk handkerchief around him, he was prepared for the desperate game.

"See! Emma Starr is fainting!" exclaimed my friend.

Glancing suddenly at the carriage, I beheld that sweet, mild face, white as linen, and her beautiful little hands clasped convulsively on her bosom, as if to keep back the heart from bursting. The agony, however, seemed to pass in a moment, and she continued to look calmly afterwards on the swift-changing scenes, with cheeks pallid as marble, down which tears flowed and fell in slow, even, measured drops, each drop recording a minute of speechless sorrow.

Once more the bugle sounded, and this time three loud, lingering blasts.

"Now comes the general *melee*, most perilous of all. Each man who tosses his opponent over the ropes wins a score of five," remarked Judge Paschal.

The arena then presented the appearance

of fifty different combats. By couples all the hundred gladiators had closed; they were tugging and straining to haul each other from the ring. Some had grabbed their antagonists by the hair, and were hauling them along in the dust; others had fastened their fingers with a grip of steel on yielding windpipes, endeavoring thus to choke their foes into non-resistance; while others seized suddenly some unsuspecting right hand, and strove by a quick jerk to dislocate the shoulder joint from its socket; and others still, stooping suddenly, caught the foot of the athlete, and casting him headlong to the ground, dragged the poor wretch off towards the ropes. Every method of annoyance was fair except strokes with the fists or injuries to the eye. But what surprised me most of all, although dozens must have been suffering tortures worse than the pangs of death, not a cry of pain was heard, such is the marvellous power of education, such the infinite force of habit.

"Score five for Rufus Ross, five for Kinny Davis, five for Big Jim Starr, and five for Horace Jordan!" exclaimed the marshal, in quick succeeding orders, as the tempestuous tumult still proceeded without intermission.

Foremost of all the strife might be seen the two deadly enemies, Starr and Jordan, throwing feebler men over the ropes as if they had been so many infants. Jordan, however, avoided any immediate encounter with his adversary, and to every offer of the sort by the other, replied aloud, "Wait till the ring shall be cleared of all but us two, and then you shall be gratified." And still the wild work went on till three long hours rolled away, and at length only twelve champions remained in the arena; for those once ejected were not permitted to return, and many who had fainted from sheer exhaustion had been removed by their friends.

Of the dozen left in the ring, one half consisted of the brave, bad brothers. The others, with the exception of the young lawyer, were full-blooded Cherokees, inured to toil from their cradles, and utterly insensible to fear.

With the next peal of the signal the gladiators again closed. All eyes were attracted to the combat now joined between the gigantic Starr and the slender, sinewy Jordan, as a sharp cry from the carriage of Emma attested her horror of the dreadful vision.

The two foes grappled first in the dangerous Indian hug, or "back hold," as it is usually called. Big Jim, from the fury of his onset, seemed to think he could crush in the ribs or crack the spine of his antagonist with a single effort; but the youth's frame was born to be as elastic as steel. It bent almost double without losing its balance, and then rebounding broke open the locks of those horny, herculean arms, and stood erect and free as before the bitter embrace.

A deafening shout from the previously silent spectators hailed the prodigious achievement, and Big Jim himself looked astonished at the feat. He paused, however, but a moment, and again springing forward, the arms of the two encircled each other's bosoms like hoops of iron. Again the form of Jordan bent as a willow in the wind, and then again recovering, broke open the monstrous lock. A renewed shout rent the air, accompanied by cries of "Big Jim has met his match! Huzza for the man that can break the black bear's hug!"

The Ajax of the arena heard the exclamations of rejoicing, and the sound seemed to madden him the more. Making a clutch with his huge, bony fingers, he succeeded in grasping his opponent's throat, but at the same instant felt the other fixed on his own windpipe. Hanging on and tugging at each other's necks like unconquerable bull-dogs, the two champions reeled from side to side during some minutes, till both, turning purple in the face, fell together gasping in the hot dust. Then relaxing their weary fingers, they regained their feet and stood for several seconds apart, panting for breath, yet still scowling dark and dreadful defiance.

"Let us fight with brave men's tools!" cried Big Jim, fairly frenzied with rage.

"Any you please," was the laconic answer.

"Then let us have bowie-knives, and let our left hands be fastened together," said the desperado, with a frown of a fiend incarnate.

"I am content with your proposition," was the brief response of Jordan.

At this unexpected change in the mode of combat, the excitement grew boundless. The other gladiators suspended their strife, and the beholders began to make their bets—some laying large wagers that Big Jim would kill his enemy, others staking their money on Jordan, and others on death against both.

I cast a glance towards the beautiful Emma—only one glance. I dared not hazard another, she looked so like a statue of despair carved in snow-white alabaster. Her eyes were motionless, fixed on the horrible ring, where a brother, or a lover, or perhaps both, were about to be hewn in pieces with mur-

derous knives. Her lips were livid and rigid as that of a corpse that had been dead for days.

I turned away from an apparition so ghost-like to the arena, where rapid preparations were being made for the duel. I saw the seconds bind the left hands of their principals hard and fast together with a small hempen cord, and place in the hands of each a gleaming bowie-knife of the largest size, and with an edge as keen as a razor; and I saw—and felt the very marrow creep with icy coldness in my bones at the sight—the mortal foes standing eyeing each other with calm, determined faces, in whose mirror only one expression could be detected—measureless and unutterable hate, but no shrinking token of terror. They were waiting for the word to begin.

Such unnatural modes of duelling are common on the frontier among both whites and Indians, and result chiefly from two causes; first, they put the weak or unpractised on a footing of perfect equality with the most skillful adepts in the art of slaying; second, reckless men, conscious of total superiority to the fear of death, appear to delight in demonstrating their bravery by rushing into the jaws of certain destruction. Such men often die with a smile of scornful triumph on their features—die, in fact, because they wish to die. Having been long accustomed to the work of slaughter, they contract an insane love for it, for its own sake alone. It is difficult to make persons comprehend the motives prompting to these mutual suicides who have never lived in such meridians—meridians where duels with double-barrelled shot-guns are of yearly occurrence, where men fight not unfrequently in dark rooms at midnight with dagger or pistol, where they clasp hands and walk off beetling precipices, or leap together into the depths of foaming rivers and hold each other's heads under water till both sink down into fathomless gulfs, which are their graves—in fine, where foes contrive for themselves more methods of wildly-insane homicide than ever did infatuated lovers in the pages of a French romance. I had become pretty well acquainted with such scenes in Texas and Arkansas, and yet could not forbear trembling in every limb as I saw those two youths, who ought to have been and had very nearly been brothers, standing there waiting for the word that should be the knell of their funeral and their summons to the judgment-bar of the Almighty. Yes, standing in the broad noon blaze of "the all-seeing sun," with the gaze of thousands of eyes set upon their unfeeling faces, with the sky they might never look on more so bright above, and flowers beneath so golden, and the little birds singing their roundelays, and they, with great knives drawn back, ready, ready, waiting to plunge into eternity!

"Are you ready?" asked George Sanders, Big Jim's second, in a voice ringing over the Looking-glass Prairie clear as the tones of bell metal.

"Ready!" they both answered, with thrilling distinctness, in the same breath.

"Then go ahead!" was the coarse, savage word.

And at the word, two fierce thrusts were made at two warm, beating hearts—human hearts, too, reader, like yours and mine, only braver, perhaps—and two long, keen knives pierced two bleeding sides. The first wounds, however, were not mortal, at least, not immediately so; for other blows followed, and steel clashed against steel, and the combatants still continued to battle on till their bodies were bathed in a baptism of fresh blood, and finally both staggered and fell forward at the same moment, first to their knees, and then on their faces, with their cheeks almost touching.

Then a wild, unearthly, wailing scream issued from the carriage on the mound. Another, also, had fallen, and with a sharper pain in the heart than ever emanated from the point of a bowie-knife. The beautiful Emma had fainted.

The seconds cut asunder the cords from the left hands of the antagonists, and it was found that Big Jim Starr had gone to his long home; but Horace Jordan, although frightfully mangled, soon revived, and my friend and I hurried him from the place as soon as possible, for fear of the vengeance of the other brothers. We carried him across the line into Arkansas, where, after long suffering, he recovered. Shortly after his recovery, the lovely Miss Emma Starr was missing from the Cherokee nation. I think it has been vaguely hinted that she and her husband Horace Jordan are living happily together in a Texas town.

"But has the story no moral?" interrogates the critic.

Ay, it has a great and useful moral if rightly expounded. It proves that the fear of death—that phantom horror which haunts the doors and darkens the firesides of civilized life—is, after all, not an unconquerable instinct, *but a fictitious adjunct of education.*

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